

The Four Disposessions: Invasion, Historical Maya Displacements, and Extractivist Violence in Guatemala

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The exponential increase of Central American refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants to the United States within the last decades is the product of centuries of historical displacement. Policymakers, the media, and others regularly cite “poverty” and “violence” as the root causes of migration and use these terms in an ahistorical and general manner that erases the structural inequalities that force people to migrate and seek refuge abroad. Hence, violence is solely attributed to criminal organizations and gangs, and poverty is portrayed simply as a lack of economic opportunities, contributing towards calls for further militarization and neoliberalization of the region. Overlooked is state-sponsored violence against activists, indigenous communities, human rights defenders, and journalists, among others, committed by Central American governments, often with the support of the U.S. (Batz 2021). In this article, I argue that extractivist industries and state-sponsored violence in Guatemala are rooted in settler colonial logics of invasion and extractivist violence and contribute to the current *despojo* (dispossession) of Maya and oppressed peoples.

In Guatemala, the arrival of extractivist industries has been referred to by the Ixil Maya as a “new” or “fourth invasion”; the previous three invasions being Spanish colonization, the creation of the plantation economy beginning in the late 19th century, and state-sponsored genocide during the war (Batz 2022). The use of Maya theoretical concepts such as the “four invasions” provides a grassroots historical indigenous perspective of political and social struggles, which views extractivism as a continuous and cyclical form of colonialism. Thus, the “four invasions” is used in

an active way to illustrate the ongoing occupation of colonial powers on ancestral indigenous territories, as well as refuting dominant narratives of Maya Peoples as being “conquered,” as historical memories of ongoing resistance are evidenced by community-based political lineages and organizing. These invasions are characterized by multiple forms of genocide and colonial state-sponsored violence, displacement, the imposition of development projects, and forced labor (Ibid).

Researchers from the Association for the Advance of Social Sciences (AVANCSO) using Q’eqchi’ Maya concepts, argue that the Guatemalan State’s support for megaprojects, which generates violence against Indigenous communities, is “an undeclared extractivist war” (*“jun nimla rahilal li ma junwa xwank resilal”*) (2020). The *Consejo del Pueblo Maya* similarly states that the Maya Peoples have suffered “*cuatro genocidios*” (“four genocides”) or “*cuatro despojos*” (“four disposessions”), which they identify as the Spanish invasion (1524-1821), the Liberal Reform (1821-1944), the civil armed conflict (1954-1996), and the neoliberal era (1996-Present) (2022). Scholars have also examined these recurring historical displacements in various Maya communities and the role that extractivist industries have in perpetuating the “capitalism of dispossession” (AVANCSO 2016; Bastos and de León 2013; Grandia 2009).

An Ixil Maya *compañero* who fled Guatemala and was in Mexico seeking asylum to enter the US because of his work as an anti-mining and human rights activist, claimed in reflection on the four invasions, extractivist industries, and displacements:

During the time of the conquest the Ixils suffered the dispossession of their ancestral lands by the Spanish, most of their land became fincas that were later exploited for the production of European coffee and other monocultures, but during the time of the armed conflict, once again they suffered the dispossession of their lands by the Guatemalan state. Some lands became part of the property of the state, other parts for the use of military garrisons, and another significant part was used for the creation of model villages or development poles to maintain military control over the Ixil people, the little land that the Ixils have left are invaded once again by transnational corporations for exploitation of their resources, and this forces the Ixils to leave their region to the search for new life opportunities, or to save their lives in the case of those who are being criminalized.¹

These words illustrate how Maya Peoples and others are forced to migrate because of their activism and struggle to defend their ancestral territories, and how the four dispossessions form a core tenant of the four invasions: from Spanish colonialism to the present neocolonial/neoliberal/neoextractivist era.

Recent political terror and violence in Guatemala through the overuse of states of sieges or the armed forces to repress protests has led to fears that authoritarianism and even dictatorship are back in the country. Despite widespread concerns about the human rights abuses and conflicts surrounding megaprojects such as hydroelectric plants and mining, corporations and the Guatemalan State continue to praise these endeavors as sources of development. The US government has deemed these projects as necessary for prosperity, and to combat migration (Batz 2021). The Palo Viejo hydroelectric, which began to operate in Cotzal in 2012, is illustrative of the failures of these projects to bring about development and improved social conditions towards the well-being of local communities and the environment. Instead, migration

has increased in Cotzal, which experienced two devastating hurricanes in 2020, leading to concerns about the short and long-term environmental impacts of the hydroelectric plant.

In my book, *La Cuarta Invasión* (2022), the history of the resistance movement from the Ixil Maya communities of Cotzal against the Palo Viejo hydroelectric plant is presented in depth. There I present how the plant was built by the Italian corporation Enel Green Power and is one of the largest hydroelectric plants in Central America with 87 MW of installed capacity. Enel's annual contribution to the municipal government is less than 1% of its estimated earnings of \$30 million per year. In 2022, Enel reported that the Palo Viejo hydroelectric plant could generate the equivalent energy required by 133,920 homes in Guatemala; in 2018, the national census reported that there were about 5,624 homes in Cotzal. In other words, the plant could power all the homes in Cotzal almost 24 times over. Palo Viejo's hydroelectric energy is sent elsewhere and exported out of the Ixil Region. During my fieldwork in Cotzal, the majority of the population did not have access to electricity, underscoring the disparities between the discourses of development and local realities.

Enel Green Power in Cotzal: A Decade Later

A decade after Palo Viejo became operational, I stood in Cotzal with Baltazar de la Cruz Rodríguez—an ancestral authority—beside the diversion dam where the river dried up after it was routed to a concrete canal. While pointing to the dried river, he said of the last ten years of Enel Green Power:

The construction began in 2008, they finished construction in 2012, they began to operate, generating energy, offering “development.” But... we can no longer see the aquatic life that was here more than a decade ago. Unfortunately, there is no life. Now we can only see the skeleton of the Cotzal River that has been *kidnapped* by Enel Green Power for more

¹ Translation mine.

than ten years. They came up with the term “development,” but if you came to Cotzal now in 2022... there are still communities without electricity here... It is a looting of natural resources; it is a destruction.²

Notable in this quote is the use of language tied to the violence experienced during counterinsurgency such as the *kidnapping* of the river. While the war ended, the violence continued in many ways after the 1996 Peace Accords.

In 2012, *don* Concepción Santay Gómez, an ancestral authority from Cotzal stated that the communities were concerned by the arrival of Palo Viejo since it caused environmental damage, and the consequences of having the river rerouted into concrete canals by the four hydroelectric diversion dams were not truly known. He said that the project “would not bring about benefits to the indigenous communities of Cotzal” and would only benefit Enel³. At the time, he noted how animals, such as deer and armadillos, had their historical path cut off by the canals, and that residents have found some drowning there. He states that after the river passes the plant, there are several communities downstream in Copón, Uspantán where aquatic life such as fish have completely died.

In 2022, *don* Concepción, reflecting on the last ten years, cited the 2020 Hurricanes of Eta and Iota that devastated the Ixil Region and Guatemala.

When Eta and Iota passed, well, I believe that Mother Nature was crying out for justice, for everything they did to her, because they [Enel] diverted the river. The river no longer flows at its full flow, but the river is now a *captured river*, it now goes in a canal, so it no longer feeds the mountains, it no longer feeds where it passed... It's like someone whose vein is cut,

a vein is diverted to another. I don't think it's convenient, right? Because that harms the human body. I think the same thing happens with nature. The river had its path, it had its flow there, but they diverted it, they changed the path, it now runs in a cement channel, so it no longer feeds the mountains, it no longer feeds the place where it goes.⁴

He added that since the plant was built, there has been a noticeable difference in the weather and environment:

Climate change, well there are times when the sun hits hard, it's very hot, and there are times when it rains very hard. So, we are seeing that the effect that the companies that have arrived here have had, well, it has brought a lot, a lot of damage, there is no benefit, it is more destruction to nature, destruction to the environment. As a people, we are seeing the consequences, because when it was Eta and Iota, a lot of corn rotted, and the people were no longer able to harvest their crops because there was a lot of rain. This has not happened before in the past, as the elders tell us... this has never happened to us like this before, it is because of the arrival of these megaprojects, they have damaged nature, they have damaged the earth... I believe that Mother Nature is crying out for justice.⁵

Another leader, Diego Sambrano Rodriguez, claimed that the river has been negatively impacted due to the extraction of its energy.

Regarding rivers, our grandparents say that the river has a natural flow, and in that natural flow, the river sings. The river has its route, its course is in harmony with nature. But the moment that the company comes in to block it, to build its plant, the river no longer sings, the ecosystem is damaged and practically many animals die because many animals go

² Emphasis and translation mine.

³ Translation mine.

⁴ Emphasis and translation mine.

⁵ Translation mine.

down to the banks of these rivers to drink, to satiate themselves, but not anymore. Many animals have died. Our Mother Nature, I don't know when she is going to charge us for all this destruction that the company has done.⁶

For the Ixil, the Palo Viejo hydroelectric plant has caused irreversible damage to their communities, their livelihoods, the environment, and the river, which they say has been kidnapped and prevented from singing.

One of the strongest arguments against the discourses of development promoted by the Guatemalan State and corporations such as Enel Green Power is the hundreds (possibly thousands) of Ixil and K'iche' from Cotzal who have fled Guatemala over the last decade due to historical structural inequalities. An Ixil ancestral authority explains: "Our people are looking for their own development. How do they do that? Through migration. The development option offered by Enel Green Power... is not reflected, it does not exist. It's a myth"⁷.

The demand to migrate has increased the prices that coyotes charge for a trip to the US. During my fieldwork between 2013-2015, coyotes charged between 40,000Q to 45,000Q (approximately \$5,100 – \$5,750) to migrate to the US. In 2021, this amount doubled to 95,000Q to 100,000Q (approximately \$12,100 – \$12,760), and today, it can go up as high as 150,000Q (approximately \$19,100). To finance these trips, people sometimes use their land titles as collateral to take out bank or personal loans, or loans from coyotes, all with monthly interest rates ranging from 7 to 11 percent (in some instances, interest rates could be higher). If a migrant does not make it to the United States, is deported, dies, or disappears during the journey, they and their family lose their investment, and often their land. In these cases, many people find themselves in an even worse economic situation than before their journey north.

⁶ Translation mine.

⁷ Translation mine.

⁸ Translation mine.

Remittances have been crucial for the survival of the Ixil and their communities, particularly during Hurricanes Eta and Iota and the COVID-19 pandemic. The gross and blatant corruption and mismanagement of aid by the Guatemalan State at all levels is evident during natural disasters and health crises. For example, the Guatemalan consulate in Los Angeles, California was implicated in corruption, leading to the Consul General Tekandi Paniagua being removed in June 2021 for mismanagement of aid for hurricane victims and profiting from selling COVID-19 tests. A *Los Angeles Times* report found that "more than \$100,000 in masks, food, medical supplies and personal hygiene items collected in Los Angeles, in November 2020, to help those affected by hurricanes Iota and Eta did not leave for the affected communities in Guatemala; instead, they had begun to be distributed by Consul Paniagua to local entities" (Jiménez 2021a)⁸. The consulate in Los Angeles was also implicated in a scheme that saw Guatemalan immigrants charged up to \$175 to take a COVID-19 test (which were supposed to be free at the consulate) and not provided with a receipt (Jiménez 2021b). With Hurricanes Eta and Iota, migrants and international mutual aid were instrumental in sending financial aid to feed people, provide shelter to those displaced by the hurricanes, and rebuilding damaged roads and infrastructure (Organización Internacional para las Migraciones n.d.).

While remittances are essential for indigenous communities, the unintended consequence of the influx of dollars has been the sharp and dramatic increase in land prices in Guatemala. In 2019, an Ixil leader told me that a few years before, a *cuerda* (approximately 0.3 acre) of land cost Q2,000 (approximately \$260); but after an increase in migration in the municipality, the same amount of land was worth 15,000Q (approximately \$1,950)—a 650 percent increase. Another leader stated that *campesinos* who did not migrate were unable to purchase additional

land since they could not afford the increasingly high prices. Thus, a vicious cycle emerges throughout various Maya communities in which people must migrate to buy land, with some putting the lands they did have as collateral or getting into debt to finance their trip (Heidbrink, Batz, Sánchez 2021). If they could not pay their debt, they would lose their land. Those who cannot afford inflated land prices are then forced to migrate to purchase land, leading to further increases in land prices and costs to migrate.

Land inequality in Guatemala continues to generate structural inequalities and poverty, as the “largest 2.5% of farms occupy nearly two-thirds of agricultural land while 90% of the farms are on only one-sixth of the agricultural land” (USAID n.d.). Plantations that were created by displacing indigenous peoples during the second invasion continue to operate today. The Palo Viejo hydroelectric plant was built on the *finca* San Francisco, which extends into the municipalities of Cotzal and Uspantán, and at one point measured 315 *caballerías*; the *finca* is said to have acquired its landholdings by displacing the Ixil (Batz 2022).

Another example is the HidroXacbal hydroelectric in Chajul, which was built on the *finca* La Perla, whose owners also displaced the Ixil and supported the military in committing massacres during the war. The hydroelectric project has also been characterized by the persecution of leaders, environmental devastation, and little development for surrounding communities. The words of an elder and ancestral authority in Ixil, Chajul illustrate the sense of enclosures the Ixil are confronting when he said in discussing buying land and the future for his children: “If I go north, there is a finca, if I go south, there is a finca, if I go west, there is a finca, if I go east, there is a finca. I have nowhere to go!”⁹

⁹ Translation mine.

¹⁰ Translation mine.

Conclusions

Hydroelectric plants and other megaprojects engage in extractivist violence using the armed forces to criminalize and persecute community leaders. Land defenders, water protectors, and those who protest human rights abuses risk violence and death. Often, people are forced to seek economic and political refugee abroad, where they risk further harm and violence crossing Mexico and the US-Mexico border. The impact of extractivist projects on the environment is becoming more evident with the severity of natural disasters.

These neocolonial realities of the Maya and Indigenous Peoples of Guatemala constitute the current era of the fourth invasion and the fourth dispossession. Yet, the Maya continue to actively resist and denounce the ongoing kidnapping of their rivers. While solutions to “irregular” migration proposed by settler colonial governments, such as the US, continue to fail to curb migration and instead promote destructive neoliberal policies, the Ixil are clear of the root causes of migration and inequality in Guatemala.

Both the harsh reality of Guatemala and Maya resiliency in confronting extractivist violence was expressed by a community leader who recognizes the historical injustice that they have confronted in resisting invaders:

They have persecuted us as leaders, they have really criminalized us and the social struggle... In Guatemala, Indigenous Peoples have always been deceived, it has always been a system that does not belong to us. That is why we are going to continue our fight, to face the situation in which we are living... the *finca* [San Francisco] is occupied too, that land belongs to the town, the land belongs to Indigenous Peoples.¹⁰

The struggle to defend and live in ancestral territories and the fight for a dignified collective future in Guatemala continues. The discourses of development promoted by extractivist projects are part of these colonial legacies that seek to extract for the interest of invaders rather than the well-being of Indigenous and oppressed peoples. The use of extractivist violence and displacement of Maya Peoples in Guatemala is a grim reminder that the Open Veins of Latin America continue to bleed out for the benefit of settler colonial governments and foreign corporations.

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